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Dare Officers don't just fight drugs

Ramapo officer discovers alleged case of sex abuse.

By Kate Boylan

RAMAPO - Something seemed to be bothering one of the little girls in Ramapo Police Officer Keith Schwartz's Friday DARE class a few weeks ago. He couldn't get her off his mind all weekend.

Schwartz made up an excuse to go back to the school the following Monday. He met the 10-year-old girl in the hallway and asked if she wanted to talk.

She took a deep breath and told her secret.

"I'm being abused. Could you protect me?"

Her grandfather had been raping her since she was 6.

"It was really as bad as it could get," Schwartz said. "It took a lot of courage on the girl's part to come forward."

The grandfather, whose name is being withheld to protect the victim, was charged with first-degree aggravated sexual abuse, a felony, and faces, up to 25 years in jail.

For the first time in years, the little girl could sleep at night.

To many officers, the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program is about more than teaching kids to say no to drugs, alcohol and violence. To Schwartz, it's also about protecting children and care themselves.

DARE became controversial nationally when studies showed it doesn't make much of a difference in keeping children off drugs. NBC television reported March 18 that a University of Illinois study showed more suburban DARE graduates used drugs than suburban students who did not take the course.

The Los Angeles-based organization countered that an Ohio State study shows the program curtails drug use if classes are continued through high school.

Ramapo Police Chief Timothy Ruggiero said the girl who trusted her DARE officer illustrates the importance of programs that put police officers in touch with children.

"If they save one child, what's the value we can place on that?" Ruggiero said. "Who would know what her fate would have been if there weren't some intervening?"

Other DARE officers have had similar experiences. "People don't understand that there's a lot more to it than just the anti-drug part," Suffern's Officer Clarke Osborn said.

Many students become familiar with police in early grades through Adopt-A-Cop programs, which emphasize such issues as avoiding strangers and good touch/bad touch.

Ruggiero said he would like to see police working in high schools as well. Schools have guidance counselors, nurses, teacher and others who help. But police become extra resources, Ruggiero said.

Before telling Schwartz her story, the girl asked whether he would have to tell anyone. He would, but he assured her he would stand by her during the process.

"I'll never forget it, the way she looked at me," Schwartz said. "It's like a whole load off her mind, I mean rightfully so. I asked her after why she told me, and she said, 'Because you're my best friend.'"

"To some kids you're a cop, to some kids you're a teacher, and to some kids you're a friend. And to some kids you're all three. We're not out there chasing rainbows. We know we're not going to change the world. We do our little part."

Osborn can be seen chatting with youngsters at Suffern street fairs or sharing pizza with them downtown, an advantage officers, in larger areas don't have, he said. "Any time they need me, they can walk downtown and find me."

He also reached out through A DARE hockey league, trips to ballgames and through a special telephone line, 357-DARE.

Sloatsburg Elementary Principal Ron Anagnostis remembers one student who got help a few years ago after sharing a family problem. He sees Dare's benefits through essays his students write at the end of the 17-week program.

"This class will probably save my future," one states.

Community support, such as all the volunteers who cooked up a recent spaghetti dinner, as well as town funding, have been great, Anagnostis said.

"But really the philosophy for us is that if it helps one child to say 'no' at a critical moment in their life, then every single penny that is invested in that program is worth it."